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Where Have All the Local Politicians Gone? A Preliminary Examination of Causes and Impacts of Acclamation in Canada's Municipal Governments

Subject keywords: elections, Head of Council, public administration,
Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)

Geographical keywords: Canada, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba,
Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland &
Labrador

MPA Research Report

Submitted to:

The Local Government Program
Department of Political Science
The University of Western Ontario

Sheena Earl
July 2020

Acknowledgements

To my MRP supervisor Dr. Laura Stephenson, thank you for the patience, guidance and support provided throughout this long writing process. I've appreciated your input and your belief in my ability to effectively balance family, work and school life.

To all of the committed, passionate faculty of the Local Government Program, I'm very appreciative of the time and energy each of you put into creating an engaging and open learning environment. Special thanks to Dr. Joe Lyons and Dr. Zack Taylor whose efforts to ensure the best possible experience for each of their students does not go unnoticed.

To the many classmates I've met over the past few years, thank you for making Western feel like home. Decisions I make throughout my career will undoubtedly be positively influenced by the experiences and ideas you have all shared with me. I wish you all nothing but the best in your current and future endeavours and hope our paths cross many times again.

To my employer, the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville with special thanks to CAO Andy Brown and Clerk Lesley Todd for providing me with the ability and encouragement to participate in the Local Government Program at Western.

To my family and in particular to my husband Corey, thank you for never questioning my ambition. Thanks for keeping me in your thoughts on those long drives to and from London and for always being so proud of my accomplishments.

Finally, this paper is dedicated to Louie, my internal classmate, whose kicks I counted all through the Spring term of 2019.

Report Title: Where Have All the Local Politicians Gone? A Preliminary Examination of Causes and Impacts of Acclamation in Canada's Municipal Governments

Abstract: Why are local government acclamations so common, and is it a problem for municipal democracy? This paper provides a preliminary examination of local uncontested elections through the exploration of various opinions and arguments raised on this topic. Since the academic literature on acclamations at the local level is extremely sparse, information was gathered through a content analysis of online newspaper articles and by performing interviews with current mayors from some of the most and least competitive municipalities following the 2018 election cycle. The following eight reasons for the occurrence of acclamations are referenced in the non-academic literature, many of which are supported by interview findings: apathy/lack of interest in local government, incumbency advantage, poor pay, heavy and demanding workloads, damage to reputation/criticism, shrinking populations, lack of power/prestige of local positions, and the length of the term of office. Findings from both the content analysis and the interviews demonstrate that perspectives on acclamations are mixed. Some past and current local politicians, representatives from municipal associations, various Chief Electoral Officers and political science experts argue acclamations are a sign of public satisfaction while others say uncontested elections contribute to low voter turnout and a democracy which lacks accountability, the diverse exchange of ideas, and participation. Though it is not within the scope of this paper to examine the merits and flaws of either the perspectives offered or is there any consensus reached on the impacts of acclamations in the literature, possible strategies to increase candidate participation are briefly presented.

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Introduction

Every four years in each of Canada's 10 provinces, residents are given the opportunity to select their municipal representatives by way of direct election. As municipal government is often referred to as the level where decisions most impact constituents' day-to-day lives, local elections offer an opportunity for eligible voters to choose leaders who share a common vision for their community (and their pocketbooks). When elections approach, candidates typically emerge with front-page bios, platforms are developed and campaign teams armed with clipboards take to the neighbourhood streets. Community halls come alive with public debates, local headlines serve to amplify anticipation and yard signs in all the colours of the rainbow can be found dotting local intersections. This is the scene found in many municipalities across Canada, especially in its cities, where individuals put their names forward in competition for particular electoral races.

Much more underwhelming electoral events, however, are on the rise in many parts of this country as an increasing number of municipal races are going uncontested. In the most recent municipal elections held in Ontario in 2018, 477 positions out of 2,864 (16.6%) were determined by acclamation, meaning only one candidate declared their interest in the particular office (AMO Elections Database 2018). In the same election, 5% of Ontario's local governments had their entire Councils acclaimed meaning that 26 municipalities in the province did not need to arrange or hold an election unless required for school board positions (ibid). According to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), the instance of acclamations of municipal offices in Ontario specifically has been steadily increasing since at least 2003 (CBC News Ontario 2018).

As uncontested races are becoming increasingly common in Canada's most populous province, it is perhaps not surprising to note that competition at the local levels across the country, from Newfoundland to British Columbia, is similarly stark. According to the province's 2016 Municipal Elections Report, Saskatchewan saw a staggering 80% of local government positions go uncontested, up from 73% in the previous election cycle (Bridges 2018). Newfoundland and Labrador saw 55% of their municipal councils fully acclaimed in 2013 and a total of 18% of municipalities were unable to fill all of the Council seats (Edwards 2018). In Prince Edward Island, 41 of the province's 45 municipalities were fully acclaimed in the 2018 municipal election (Yarr 2018). Perhaps more surprisingly, in Canada's second most populous province, Quebec, 33% of municipalities did not need to hold elections as all races went uncontested (Wheeler, Rocha & Montpetit 2017). Of this group in Quebec, 23 municipalities have gone without any competition since 2003 (ibid). It is not only small rural municipalities facing acclamations for one or more races as uncontested elections occurred in mid- to large-sized municipalities this past election cycle, as well. The City of Winnipeg, for example, experienced an acclamation in 2018 as did the Town of Oakville, Ontario and the Halifax Regional Municipality with populations of 198,832 and 424,900, respectively (City of Winnipeg 2018, Town of Oakville 2018, Halifax Regional Municipality 2019).

Although increasing, uncontested elections, especially at the local level, are severely understudied. The purpose of this research paper is provide a preliminary examination of local government acclamations in Canada by responding to the following research questions:

- 1) What factors might contribute to races going uncontested?
- 2) Is election by acclamation acceptable or harmful for municipal democracy?

To answer these questions, I take two approaches. First, an examination of current, relevant literature will be explored. Research related specifically to political competition and its impact at the local level is extremely sparse. While some research arising from the United States and other democracies outside of Canada will be included, the volume of material currently available on non-competitive elections is not a sufficient base for a fulsome review. The research on the topics of candidate motivation and ambition, though not extremely plentiful or representative of many different locations, does serve to inform us about why individuals decide to take a run at elected office, however. This specific research will be used to supplement what is available related to political competition. Due to the inability to identify individuals who have decided against running for Council and ask them why, and since the academic literature on this topic is extremely sparse, what we can do to increase our understanding of this phenomenon is to turn to news coverage of local government acclamations. A content analysis will be used to effectively explore relevant journalism on the topic, including arguments put forward by experts, past and current politicians and municipal association representatives raised in response to the research questions identified above. In order to provide additional insight with respect to the apparent validity of these findings, telephone interviews were conducted with nine mayors across Ontario from municipalities who experienced a range of competitiveness in the 2018 election. These interview findings, while not ground breaking, at the very least serve to support or reject anecdotal evidence provided by various news outlets. Finally, though it is not the intent of this research to debate the merits of the causes or

impacts of acclamations, suggested efforts to increase candidate recruitment and participation provided in the literature will also be briefly discussed.

Literature Review

Political Competition

Scholarly research on the specific topic of acclamation and uncontested elections, especially at the local level in Canada, is lacking. What does exist relates more generally to theories related to political competition, including its impact on representative democracy. The term “competition” in this literature typically relates to factors beyond the instance of simply having more than one candidate in a race for electoral office, which is the topic of study for the remainder of this particular paper. Rather, political competition, having various measures and indexes, relates to the closeness of a particular race and often is used to describe elections in systems with competing political parties. Regardless of this difference and even though much of this research relates to American state and federal levels of government, a review of the scholarly work regarding the impacts of competition is undoubtedly useful here as we examine the impacts of uncontested races more generally. Similar to the question raised above regarding whether acclamations are acceptable or harmful in representative democracies, the writing of academics interested in political competition and its impacts also seems to fall within one of two camps: those who argue electoral competition is beneficial and those who provide evidence to the contrary. Building on well-known democratic theorist Robert Dahl’s (1956) view that competition is crucial to an effective democracy, academics provide support that close races lead to increased public knowledge and engagement, both of which are foundational to good

quality democracy (Breux & Couture 2018, 3). For instance, research indicates that where a race is considered competitive, voter turnout is increased as members of the electorate are more likely to believe their vote will affect the outcome (Evans 2014, 9). Further, according to Kahn and Kenny (1997) where there is intense competition between candidates, media coverage of the election is often amplified. Unable to avoid the constant stream of information, constituents in these locations are found to be more motivated to use that information to make decisions at the ballot box (Kahn & Kenny 1997, 1175-1176). The benefits of this increased public awareness and engagement in areas with fierce competition is further supported by Kam (2006), who argues that citizens mobilized by competitive election campaigns are more likely to think more deeply about politics and the decisions of their representatives.

It is not only citizens who feel more inclined to act when faced with a close race. Research suggests that elected representatives are also found to be more responsive and active in their legislative duties when they are elected following a close race, rather than appointed or acclaimed. Konisky & Ueda (2011) studied the impacts of elections with weak competition on legislators' performance and effort while in office through an examination of bills put forth and enacted. They found that legislators who did not face any real competition were more likely to shirk or slack off in their responsibilities (Konisky & Ueda 2011, 199).

Not all research supports the notion that competition in democratic elections is always beneficial, however. In his article titled "*The Social Sub-Optimality of Competitive Elections*" Buchler (2007) presents a hypothesis using a rational-choice framework that if society prefers Candidate A and they win by a large margin against Candidate B that is more

aligned with society's preferences. In cases where candidate races are competitive with the successor winning over others by only a slim margin, a larger segment of the voting public will be unsatisfied with the result. Buchler says that proponents of competitive elections should focus more on fostering an electoral system that promotes competitive behaviour by candidates, rather than declaring competitive elections as beneficial alone (Buchler 2007, 454).

Along similar lines, Brunell (2008) says in competitive elections where winners surpass candidates by only slim margins, there are more voters dissatisfied with the result than when races are won by landslides. In support of this view, Ramirez argues that having one's preferred candidate elected is significant as it serves to improve satisfaction with democracy (Ramirez 2009, 691). Brunell further argues that those who vote for losing candidates have lower approval ratings of their elected representatives and of the democratic process as a whole, which has implications for overall trust in government. The negative aspects that often arise between candidates in fierce competition are also cited as reasons against supporting competitive elections. An increase in 'dirty' advertising attacks and social media battles have contributed to increased apathy and distrust as voters are "turned off by conflict in the policymaking process and attack advertisements" (Goldstein & Freedman 2002, 729).

Contradictory viewpoints related to the impacts of competitive elections abound whether referring to the number of candidates or the closeness of a particular race. The duality of the views presented here are also identified in the research to be reviewed below.

Candidate Motivation

Having gleaned a general understanding of the literature related to political competitiveness, it is now useful to turn to the topic of candidate motivation.

Understanding why so many races are going uncontested presents a challenge as it is impossible to identify and seek explanations from all those who merely considered putting their names forward but chose not to in the end. In gaining an understanding of this motivation, we may have a better foundation from which to judge reasons why acclamation occurs and whether its increased occurrence necessitates greater attempts to remedy it.

This review will explore two different perspectives related to candidate motivation, beginning first with a look at theories related to ambition and then turning to the motivators identified in Self-Determination Theory. The findings from these theories will then be referenced later with respect to potential causes of acclamations in Canadian local government.

Ambition Theories

In his 1966 foundational piece on candidate motivation entitled *Ambition & Politics: Political Careers in the United States*, Joseph A. Schlesinger developed and effectively argued a theory of why certain individuals seek particular political offices. To him, political careers at all levels are a result of both individual personalities and “political opportunity structures” which hold successful candidates in check as they must act as their voters wish in order to meet their goals of obtaining higher office. He argued that in order for a citizenry to hold their elected representatives accountable, political elites must have the desire to succeed to higher offices. Using data captured between 1900 and 1958, Schlesinger found that political advancement in the United States is not generally static, but

rather the motivation and ambition of politicians at all levels is guided towards higher rungs on the career ladder (Schlesinger 1966, 118).

Another foundational offering in the realm of candidate motivation and ambition was put forward by Black (1972) who modelled Schlesinger's Ambition Theory as one of rational choice. Black argued that the benefits of holding the higher office must be greater than the costs associated with attempting to obtain it, such as time and money spent campaigning. Black came to the "rational office-seeker model" through examining survey responses from 435 city councillors in the San Francisco Bay area who were asked if they planned to retire, seek re-election or attempt to secure political advancement. Through this study he found the size of the electoral unit and the degree of competitiveness of the particular race impacted the physical and emotional costs of campaigning. Those facing strong competitors and/or divisive issues were less likely to respond that they were looking for political advancement. Black also highlighted the importance of life events and milestones and the impact these have on the resources available to politicians in establishing a successful campaign. This attention to lifestyle changes differs from Schlesinger's traditional view which assumed that every politician is a "determined young man looking forward to a long career climbing the political ladder" (Black 1972, 155).

Both original Ambition Theory, and that including the application of rational choice to candidate motivation, have been tested using gender, race and location lenses. They have also been expanded upon by many scholars with the opinion that the main theory excludes many important factors. To address the critique that the original Ambition Theory fails to incorporate changes in other schools of thought on candidate motivation developed to examine the ambition of candidates and potential candidates throughout time, including at

the time when candidates first decide to run for office.

Fulton et al. (2005), for example, call into question the very basis of these classic and influential studies. They draw attention to the idea that politicians' personal decisions to seek higher office should be viewed in two stages – first, as a cost-benefit calculation to decide whether to run for higher office, and second, the timing of the decision to put their name forward (Fulton et al. 2005, 245). An enhancement to the early understandings of candidate motivation, *nascent political ambition* was developed as a model related to reasons and motivations which first lead individuals to decide to run for a particular office. It asks why and when do *individuals* become candidates opposed to why and when *politicians* attempt election to higher office.

According to scholars Fox and Lawless (2005), when studying candidate ambition and motivation “to bypass *nascent political ambition* is to leave a critical void in our understanding of who comes to control the reins of all levels of government” (Fox & Lawless 2005, 654). They offer very interesting and important examinations of *nascent political ambition* including the coining of the term “dynamic ambition” which is a notion that many factors taken together have an impact on the amount of political ambition an individual feels throughout their lifetime (ibid, 444). Fox and Lawless use their dataset of Citizen Political Ambition to effectively answer their question of ‘who runs and why?’ To do this, the authors identified individuals from common career backgrounds of politicians (business, law, education and non-profit) and surveyed them regarding their interest in seeking political election. They captured this data in 2001 and again in 2008 in order to identify and track changes in interest depending on life circumstances and the political environment. Fox and Lawless used this data to test a number of different hypotheses

relating to candidate motivation including personal, environmental and institutional reasons why likely candidates choose to put their name forward or not. Through the responses it was found that the number of available seats, term limits and level of legislative professionalism and knowledge at the time of nominations all impact whether likely candidates follow through with running or not. Beyond this, they found that self-identified political efficacy, whether the individuals were encouraged or recruited and the timing of lifestyle changes and milestones such as marriage, starting a family and retirement, were relevant. Of particular interest in their findings is the fact that nearly 40% of the potential candidates changed their response related to whether they were likely to run over the seven year period, demonstrating the existence and importance of the nascent ambition their work refers to.

Theories related to ambition and the research conducted applying these to a variety of contexts is useful for this particular study as it forms a starting point from which to examine issues of candidacy and candidate motivation at the local government level.

Having an understanding of the general costs and benefits of office such as resources, time, effort, stress and power, wealth, and status informs our question of whether local office remains interesting to the rational-office seeker, for example. As many individuals decide to begin their political careers at the local level, examining nascent political ambition is most relevant for research related to municipal government.

Self-Determination Theory

A second common theory used in the literature related to candidate motivation focuses on personalities and individual goals. Based on the study of classical human behaviour, Self-Determination Theory developed out of academic work on motivation conducted by Deci

and Ryan (2000). The theory's main idea is that individuals make a whole host of decisions based on both internal (intrinsic) motivators such as core values, ethics, morals and preferences and external (extrinsic) motivators including money, power, status and rewards. Deci and Ryan developed a continuum whereby an individual demonstrates the highest level of self-determination and satisfaction with their choices when their internal motivators outshine the external rewards (Deci & Ryan 2000, 242).

In their book *Local Elections and the Politics of Small Scale Democracy* (2012), Oliver, Ha & Callen use data collected from local politicians in the Greater Chicago Area to examine how the size, scope of activities and inherent bias of certain local governing bodies impact specific elements of local government, including who runs for local office. They found that extrinsic motivators such as compensation, self-aggrandizement and power, though more tangible and easier to measure, were less common motivations in local politicians (Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012, 92). This specific finding is supported by research conducted by Scott, Medeiros & Erl (2018). Through a survey of Canadian rural local politicians in 2017 related to motivation and reasons for seeking local office, they found that the largest motivator for seeking office was based in community-oriented rather than personally-oriented goals. A large majority of respondents (67.8%) believed that they had the qualities that could best serve their municipality and improve the current state of affairs.

Understanding why individuals choose to initially run for office informs our knowledge of what particular motivations exist locally and allows us to evaluate whether various factors such as pay and reputation may impact a candidate's motivation as much as inherent personality.

Method

Content Analysis

Two methods will be used in tandem to respond to this paper's research questions of what factors might contribute to races going uncontested and whether election by acclamation is acceptable or harmful for municipal democracy. In order to identify factors contributing to acclamations and viewpoints related to their instance, an analysis of content found in online newspaper articles across Canada on the topic of local government acclamations was conducted. To complete this task, the online news archive accessible through Google News was used to search for keywords *municipal +election + acclamation* with Canada set as the location in the search settings. The search took place on June 26, 2020 and provided 266 results. The articles were then examined for applicability to the research questions at hand. Those relating only to school board elections, acclamations to positions in higher levels of government, and articles merely mentioning election results or candidate biographies without any additional depth associated with acclamations were not included in the analysis. Also left out were articles covering local politics of unorganized territories or Indigenous reserves and Chamber of Commerce elections. Editorials and opinion pieces were included since many of the arguments put forward in a number of these sources are of similar nature.

The search only revealed articles from the past four years. A change in search terms to include articles dating back to January 1, 2000 did not reveal any additional applicable articles which suggests an increase in media coverage on the topic in recent years.

After reducing the search findings to only those applicable for the purposes of this

research, 32 relevant articles remained (listed with indication of arguments raised in Appendix A), all of which offered anecdotes and supported reasons as to why acclamations are increasing at the local level and/or provided support for one or both conflicting perspectives on whether acclamation is acceptable or harmful. Direct quotations were plentiful in the discourse and some will be highlighted in an attempt to contribute to the narrative of these differing perspectives. Where it exists, support from academic research will be used to substantiate claims made in the press. To avoid assumptions about the applicability of certain references to all municipalities across Canada, support for many of these arguments will focus only on available Ontario-based research or generalized findings applicable to all settings.

Interviews

As many of the articles examined in the content analysis included comments from candidates and elected representatives, efforts were made to better understand opinions with respect to acclamation through direct questioning. In the fall of 2019, prior to the undertaking of the content analysis outlined above, telephone interviews were conducted with nine mayors across Ontario. The sample was limited to this province only to ensure similar institutions and electoral processes. In determining who to interview, election data relating to the average competitiveness of each municipality was gathered from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario's (AMO) dedicated election database (elections.amo.on.ca) between August and September, 2019. Municipal data from six of nine zones designated by the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario were included in the data collection (see Appendix B for zone map). A choice was made to exclude election data from Zones Seven to Nine which include the Districts of

Algoma, Cochrane, Kenora, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Rainy River, Sudbury, Timiskaming, the City of Greater Sudbury and the City of Thunder Bay due to the very small size and remoteness of many of these municipalities and the institutional differences which exist in northern organized territories. The City of Toronto was also left out of this analysis due to the massive difference between its population size and the next largest City. Upper tier municipalities with Councils comprised of elected Heads of lower tier Councils were excluded as they do not hold municipal elections.

For the remaining 269 municipalities, data relating to the total number of offices, the number of offices acclaimed, and the number of candidates for each office was collected and averaged to identify the most and least competitive municipalities in the 2018 municipal election. In the very rare occurrence where data was missing, municipal websites were consulted to fill in gaps (e.g. percentage of voter turnout in the Town of Gananoque).

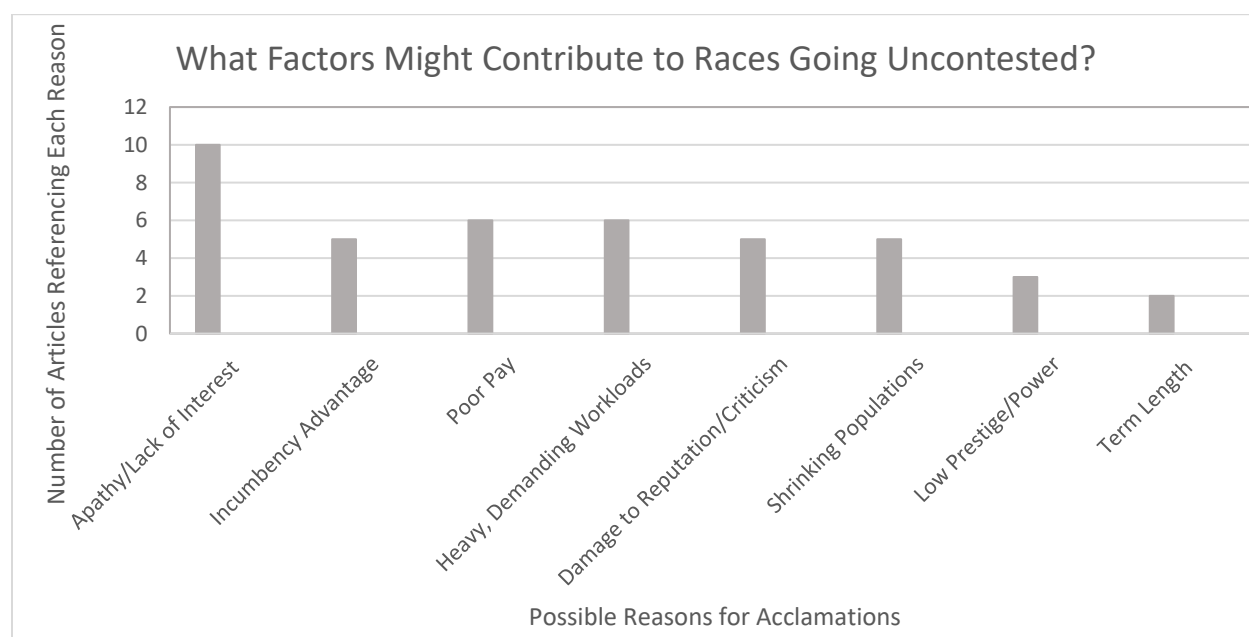
Once the municipalities under study were ranked from least to most competitive with respect to their electoral races, the Heads of Council from ten of the least and ten of the most competitive areas as well as the ten median-ranked municipalities were contacted by email at the email address listed on each of their municipal websites. The Heads of Council were contacted rather than individual Councillors for consistency purposes as they are the only locally elected position whose role is outlined in Ontario's *Municipal Act*. In response to the invitation to participate in a telephone interview, nine Mayors or 33% agreed to participate and interviews were conducted at their convenience during the fall of 2019. Interview questions (attached in Appendix C) probed for opinions on whether acclamations are viewed as acceptable or harmful and the impact of real and proposed

changes to compensation, workload, and public criticism on their interest in seeking re-election. Demographic information related to professional backgrounds and education was acquired as were details surrounding candidate motivation, incumbency and number of years previously served on Council. Findings from these interviews will be used to contribute further to the narrative provided in the analysed newspaper content.

What Factors Might Contribute to Races Going Uncontested?

The intent of this section is to present arguments raised in the content analysis and interviews with respect to possible factors that might contribute to races going uncontested. Of the 32 articles reviewed 22 or 69% suggested possible reasons for acclamations at the local level across Canada. Figure 1 outlines the number of articles mentioning eight arguments or reasons for acclamations..

Figure 1. Number of articles referring to each suggested factor contributing to races going uncontested.



The reasons offered in the articles come from a host of respondents including former and current municipal council members, municipal association representatives, and political science and social studies professors. It is worth mentioning that many of these factors intersect and are often referred to in pairs in the articles. For example, a lack of interest in running for local office may be directly tied to poor compensation which may also be linked to low power and prestige associated with municipal government. In the review of each reason below, academic support for these arguments will be included, where it exists, as well as applicable findings from the interviews conducted with the nine mayors.

Reason #1: Apathy/Lack of Interest

“No one cares.” – Danny Nunes, Former Mayoral Candidate for Terrace B.C. (Kurjata 2018)

Voter apathy or lack of interest in local issues is the most often mentioned reason contributing to the instance of municipal uncontested elections, mentioned in 10 of the articles reviewed. Being aware of local issues or at least having an understanding of municipal responsibilities is a necessary precursor to an individual’s consideration to seek election at this level. Even though municipal government is often referred to as the level ‘closest to the people’ for impacting the day-to-day lives of its citizens, Canadians are the least interested in local politics when compared to higher levels of government. In a recent study, only one of five communities indicated a greater interest in local politics compared with other levels of government (Phillips 2014). According to a Nanos Research survey released in August, 2018 in the midst of local election campaigns, one in three Ontarians was not aware that municipal election campaigns were under way (Nanos 2008).

A demonstration of this lack of interest can be found in the notoriously low voter turnout experienced in many municipalities. Municipal elections typically see the lowest turnout of

any level of government in Canada. Less than 45% of Ontarians executed their right to vote for their municipal representatives in the past two election cycles (elections.amo.on.ca). According to Political Science Professor Emeritus Robert Williams from the University of Waterloo, it's increasingly difficult to find relevant information on the municipal candidates, especially as media coverage expands from the local to more regional level due to cut backs. "I'm interested and my job of getting informed is very, very difficult. If my interests are marginal, at the best of times, there's virtually no way you're going to get a really engaged and insightful electorate," (quoted in Bueckert 2018) he said, leading one to question whether the lack of interest is contributing to the lack of coverage or vice versa. While not the only cohort choosing against visiting the polls on Election Day, disengagement of the youth demographic at all levels of government is a prevalent factor contributing to a lack of interest and potentially impacting the low number of municipal candidates. Although some may argue that young people are finding themselves involved and engaged in local political decisions through less traditional means, research indicates that there remains a very large portion of Canadian youth not incorporating civic and political activities into their lives (Howe 2010, 4). If Canadians are overwhelmingly disinterested in the actions of local government, and by extension the opportunity to directly contribute to those actions, apathy could easily be argued as contributing to the lack of younger candidates.

All nine of the mayors interviewed indicated volunteering and other civic activities as precursors to their political life in municipal office. When asked why they initially decided to seek office, their responses were similar in that they wanted to contribute to the greater good of their community. These motivations are similarly reflected in research conducted

with respect to the theory of Self Determination and the power of intrinsic rewards (Deci & Ryan 2000, Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012). Though it is not only younger populations who are increasingly disinterested in local government, the rise in acclamations may continue if an increasing number of youth are not turning to these traditional mechanisms. If they are getting involved through other less traditional avenues instead or because they do not have the desire to contribute to community-oriented goals, retiring council members may be leaving vacant seats behind if this lack of interest for youth continues into adulthood. This appears to be a current trend as studies like those mentioned above consistently show large segments of the population, not just youth, are disinterested.

Reason #2: Incumbency Advantage

“Challengers may have to spend the entire campaign period trying to build the name recognition incumbents take for granted. Many challengers simply don’t make it out of the gate.” - Royce Koop, Associate Professor and Head of the Political Studies Department at the University of Manitoba (Koop 2018)

Eight of the nine mayors interviewed had served in the previous term of Council. Five held the same position and three were ‘promoted’ to the Head of Council following previous stints as Councillors. Of these four were acclaimed to their positions. It is unknown if their incumbency advantage prevented other candidates from coming forward but this is an argument put forth in seven of the articles reviewed. Reference to an incumbency advantage is the second most mentioned reason contributing to uncontested local electoral races. In the 2018 municipal elections in Ontario, 77% of the acclaimed races were held by incumbents (elections.amo.on.ca). Politicians who have been around the block, so to speak, benefit from name recognition, experience and greater access to resources (Kusher, Siegel & Stanwick 1997, 543). In research conducted related to this ‘incumbency advantage’,

typical findings are reflected in the high instances of re-election for those who have previously served (Lucas 2019, Gellman & King 1990, Fowler 2016).

Beyond the name recognition and experience of returning politicians, a certain level of admiration for incumbents may also serve to keep competitors at bay. Potential mayoral candidates, for example, including sitting councillors interested in a promotion to a higher office, may feel it best to wait out the incumbent if they feel they've done an especially good job or that their loyalty would be tarnished should they decide to run against a political ally. This is the exact situation Councillor Gordie Merton of the Town of Gravenhurst referenced in his interview with the regional newspaper regarding the results of the 2018 local election which saw the Mayor acclaimed. Councillor Merton explained that he didn't want to run for Mayor in 2018 as he had in 2014 because he "respects the man who is currently running for Mayor too much" (Farmer 2018). Rather than take on a well-known and experienced candidate, interested individuals may choose to wait out the incumbent which may in turn contribute to the instance of election by acclamation. Individuals otherwise interested in seeking office may be deterred from filing for the nomination due to challenges associated with facing a returning member and also to avoid taking on someone they admire at the polls.

Reason # 3: Poor Pay

"[I]t's clear that we need to polish the image of the municipal politician. We need to show how essential the work is. And we need to talk about how little they are paid, about how the pay is not reflective of the work involved. – Sandra Breux, *Quebec's National Institute of Scientific Research* (Valiante 2017)

Another contributing factor to uncontested elections noted by local government practitioners through the press is that financial compensation is inadequate to attract new

candidates, especially in Canada's small to mid-size municipalities. Poor pay was indicated as a reason for a lack of interested candidates in six of the articles.

In a vast majority of Canada's local governments, Council positions are considered part-time and many do not offer a wage that would attract young professionals or be sufficient enough to support an individual without additional income. According to the Executive Director of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the average Council salary in small communities in Ontario is between \$12,000 and \$15,000 per year (CBC News Ontario 2018). This means that interested individuals must have secure income from other sources such as full-time employment, pension or savings.

In 2016, the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) profiled municipal Councillors, including the amount of compensation available to certain offices in the province's small rural municipalities. The report identified limited remuneration as a deterrent to attracting diverse and young candidates (Rural Ontario Institute Municipal Councillor Profile 2016, 3). The ROI's research identified that increasing financial demands and burdens on the segment of the population with young families contributes to their inability to effectively run and succeed in local elected positions. Further, it noted that potential candidates from the younger demographic place a higher value on compensation benefits in exchange for costs associated with lifestyle sacrifices (ibid).

Remuneration typically stays static over many years despite increases in the cost of living and other income measures because local politicians are in charge of setting their own rates of pay. According to a survey conducted by the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario on the topic of Council remuneration, 54% of municipalities responding said compensation reviews had only been conducted once in the

last four to 10 years (AMCTO 2018, 36) Rather than draw criticism and controversy over increases in salaries, a clear and challenging conflict of interest, some Councils chose to forego conversations about compensation review for many years (Schobel 2014, 138). Examining this factor in light of Black's "rational office-seeker model" referred to earlier, it appears the financial benefits of seeking local office are not favourably offset by the high cost of an individual's time, especially in an era when the burdens on the shoulders of local politicians are growing.

Academic research on the matter of municipal Council remuneration appears to offer contradictory evidence with respect to the belief that pay is important to those considering service in local government. Some indicate that if higher pay was offered, a greater number of candidates, including better suited and qualified candidates, would be attracted (Avellaneda 2009, Fernandez 2005, Meier & O'Toole 2002). However, as noted earlier, findings from alternative research arising from American subjects suggests that local politicians, especially those from small rural areas, are not motivated by extrinsic rewards such as remuneration (Oliver, Ha & Callen 2011, 97). Interview findings seem to support this particular perspective, at least for the acclaimed members representing small and/or rural centres. Six out of nine mayors, including one designated as full-time, indicated they would continue to seek re-election even if the job were to be completely unpaid. Differing views on the topic of pay are not limited to those found in the literature, however. Four out of five of the mayors willing to serve without compensation also indicated they felt the pay they did receive was inadequate. Complexities with respect to pay are obviously further compounded by both the tangible and invisible burdens of workload and stress arising

from potential damages to reputation/criticism, the next two reasons for acclamations offered in the articles.

Reason #4: Heavy, Demanding Workloads

“Potential candidates may well be scared off by increasingly complex problems in small towns. The regulatory and financial burden to running a Council is definitely increasing.”
– *Craig Pollett, CEO of Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador* (Smellie 2017)

Often cited as a reason for a lack of interest in local candidacy alongside the reference to poor compensation, increasingly heavy and demanding workloads are noted as a cause of acclamations in six of the 22 relevant articles. When asked about time commitments, a City of London Councillor said “a decision to run is a decision to not do something else” (Dubinski 2017).

Heavy regulatory and financial reporting requirements, a push to smaller, more efficient Councils and an increase in both geographic and population size following amalgamations and restructuring in many provinces has led to an ever greater demand on individuals in power locally. Municipal issues are growing in scope and complexity and councils are being called on more and more often to respond to so called “wicked problems” such as homelessness, mental health, and climate change (Graham & Bastedo 2018, 13).

Oftentimes, members are appointed to other committees, boards and organizations, which increases the time needed to prepare for, attend and contribute to numerous meetings. As a vast majority of Ontario’s council members are considered part-time with no designated support staff, the workloads are often so heavy that the work cannot be easily accomplished while also working full-time. This issue is further exacerbated by the restraints on adequate compensation identified above, as those who need to work to survive would not be able to give up their jobs to pursue a seat on most Councils.

All of the mayors interviewed support the opinion that local politicians are faced with severely heavy workloads and seven out of nine indicated they were unprepared or surprised by the amount of work required. Five out of nine indicated that an increase in workloads would contribute to a decision against seeking re-election, demonstrating that increasing responsibilities may be becoming unmanageable and unattractive, even to incumbent candidates.

Reason #5: Damage to Reputation/Criticism

“Municipal duties [must] be carried out in an increasingly emotionally fraught climate made more complex by social media. “ – *Pat Vanini, Executive Director of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario* (CBC News Ontario 2018)

According to the Town of Inniskillen’s Mayor Kevin Marriott, there has been a “shift in the tone of municipal discourse” over his 26 years in public service (CBC News Ontario 2018). This was an argument presented in five of the articles reviewed. In an interview with CBC News, Mayor Marriott said people seem more likely to “level sharp critiques” of local government decisions than they were in the past (ibid). Harsh criticism coupled with low pay and heavy workloads mentioned above appear to be off-setting the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by some potential candidates.

The role of municipal councillor in Canada’s small, rural towns is constant and inescapable. Not only are elected representatives expected to put in long hours for little pay, they are also expected to be willing to chat about local issues while conducting personal business, such as grocery shopping in a local market. Increased access to local government via social media, for example, may be turning some off to the idea of putting their names forward. According to the former president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Pat

Vanini, acclamations may be an outcome of an increasingly emotionally challenging environment for local politicians. She referred to the impact social media has had on the nature of the dialogue between citizens and politicians and questioned whether individuals would want to risk their reputations for inevitably unpopular decisions (ibid).

Seven of nine mayors agreed with Mayor Marriott's interpretation of the changes in the environment for local politicians. Since a majority of the mayors interviewed were incumbents, they have undoubtedly experienced the influence social media has played in at least two cycles of municipal elections across Canada. Their responses with respect to the challenges arising for them due to increased reliance and use of social media in the last decade were mixed. Those who indicated it had made their roles more challenging and open to negative criticism also mentioned the connections offered by these platforms have helped with communications and outreach. It seems reasonable, however, to anticipate that holding office in today's increasingly interconnected world would be very different than in the past when social media was not an available tool and public satisfaction and trust in government was higher.

Reason #6: Shrinking Populations

"Combine an aging demographic with a small population, and community engagement is becoming maxed out." – *Mayor Fred Butler, Northern Arm, Nfld.* (Barry 2017)

Although not completely absent from large city elections, acclamations most commonly occur in Canada's small rural areas. Reference to the impact of shrinking populations in these places was raised as contributing to an increase in acclamations in five of the articles. Skills shortages are common in rural and small communities and this coupled with a general lack of interest may mean there are fewer and fewer qualified candidates to seek

the job of municipal councillor in these small, rural towns. In a pan-Canadian report by Statistics Canada titled *Strengthening Rural Canada: Fewer and Older: Population and Demographic Challenges Across Rural Canada*, population projections based on historical data, mortality and fertility rates and migration flows from Statistics Canada predict 17.2% and 12.2% declines in rural populations in Ontario and British Columbia, respectively, by the year 2025 (Statistics Canada 2015, 4-6). Economic trends in these shrinking areas are not often positive as home values dip, unemployment rates increase and businesses are left unsupported. These issues further exacerbate the problem of decline as they push residents to more prosperous city centres (McNutt 2012). As Howe's (2010) research referenced earlier shows the younger demographics are not getting involved in local issues at nearly the rate of their parents and grandparents and are consistently migrating out of rural towns to city centres, one is left wondering whether small towns might have simply run out of candidates for local office.

Demographic information collected from the interviewees revealed that all mayors interviewed are above the age of 41. Five Heads of Council interviewed were between the ages of 41 and 60 and the other four were over the age of 61. In terms of support for the role of population size, the Rural Ontario Institute's Rural Councillor Profile also speaks to concerns related to an impending decrease in interested newcomers as the politicians of the baby boom generation retire.

Reason #7: Low Prestige/Power of Local Office

"If we see many acclamations and uncompetitive races, it may reflect that potential candidates do not see the role as sufficiently important to be worth pursuing." - Royce Koop, Associate Professor and Head of the Political Studies Department at the University of Manitoba (Koop 2018)

Referenced in three of the articles considered, contributors speculate that a lack of prestige and/or power inherent in the office of local mayor or councillor may be incentivizing otherwise interested candidates to pursue political goals at higher levels of government instead. Oliver, Ha & Callen (2012) define the term “managerial democracies” to explain a general lack of interest in becoming involved in municipal politics compared to other levels of government in the United States. To them, the benefits of being elected to local office are much more limited than those at the state or national level. They argue that local politicians, especially those in small to mid-size municipalities, fill what is primarily a ‘custodial role’ (Oliver, Ha & Callen 2012, 7). This means the responsibilities of local politicians aren’t very exciting and as many of the actions of government at this level are heavily prescribed by higher orders, there is little room for power, influence, major initiative or change (ibid).

Although this research was based in a setting outside of Canada, similar arguments are applicable to our parliamentary system of government where municipalities exist as creatures of the province. A survey of more than 100 Mayors of municipalities larger than 10,000 people across Canada revealed that those in power wish they had more autonomy from their provincial regulators. 90% of survey respondents in the 2018 study titled *Canada’s Mayors Speak*, indicated that their councils are required to turn to their provincial governments for funding and authority even though 75% feel they have “very little influence when their province is making decisions that affect their community” (Graham & Bastedo 2018, 13). When asked what they would most like to see changed in local

government in Canada, 79% of respondents indicated a desire for more financial flexibility and decision-making authority (ibid, 14).

While according to the research of Deci and Ryan (2000) the external rewards of power and self-aggrandizement are not big motivators for local politicians, especially in small rural areas, individuals seeking to make a real impact in their municipalities (ie. those with intrinsic community-minded goals) may not be seeing the potential for achieving their desires at this level.

Reason #8: Term Length

“It certainly influenced my decision to leave [politics]. Four years of intense community service is a big commitment.” –*Jillian Merrick, Former Councillor, Prince George, B.C. (Kurjata 2018)*

The final reason provided in the discourse related to acclamations is that of term limits. A reference to such limits was made in only two of the 22 articles and all arose from sources covering municipal elections in British Columbia. The province recently enacted amendments to increase term length from three to four years which came into effect in the 2018 election. While not noted as deterrents to candidates in other provinces who have had a four year term established for multiple election cycles, it is important to raise this issue especially in conjunction with the other possible causes mentioned earlier such as low pay and heavy workloads. These claims support evidence offered by Fox and Lawless (2004) that term lengths, along with other factors, impact a likely candidate’s decision to put their name forward.

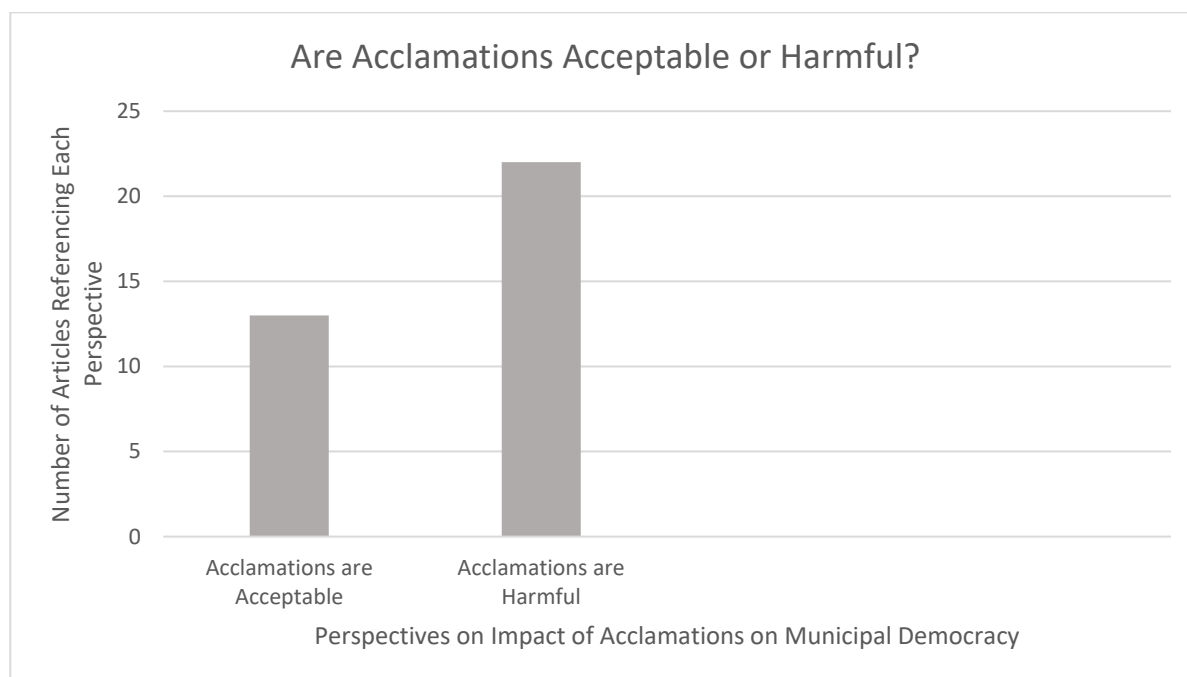
Is Election by Acclamation Acceptable or Harmful for Municipal Democracy?

Now that we have explored reasons contributing to the number of acclamations at the local level in Canada, what remains within the scope of this research is identifying whether or not acclamations are viewed as a problem. Like much of the limited research on the topic of political competition reviewed earlier, the answer seems to depend on who you ask.

There appear to be two dominant yet contradictory views with respect to uncontested elections at the local level. One view is that acclamations are a sign of a satisfied public content to allow uncontested positions to be filled by the one candidate who put their name forward. Another is that when local electoral races go uncontested, some central tenants of representative democracy, including accountability, the exchange of diverse ideas, and public participation are negatively impacted.

Views raised in the content analyzed and interviews support this lack of consensus with respect to the impacts of acclamations on municipal democracy. Of the 32 articles reviewed in the discourse analysis, 29 (93%) provided arguments in favour of one or both perspectives on acclamations. Figure 2 below demonstrates the number of articles making reference to both views in relation to impacts associated with solo races. Although a majority of the articles point to concerns related to uncontested elections, in true journalistic fashion, many offered contradictory views in their attempt to cover the issue from a neutral standpoint. The journalists themselves did not typically take a stance, though interviews with scholars, local politicians and representatives from municipal associations coloured the discourse with clear emotions on the subject.

Figure 2. Number of articles referencing each perspective regarding the impact of acclamations on municipal democracy.



Of the mayors interviewed, all those who found themselves acclaimed to their current positions believed this to be a sign of public satisfaction. The remaining four respondents, all of whom were elected to their current positions in the most recent election cycle, shared the view that acclamations are harmful to the democratic foundations of representative democracy. While it may be the case the interview responses are reflective of current views in relation to their own avenue to success through acclamations or election, similar contradictions from a number of sources are found in online newspaper coverage on the topic.

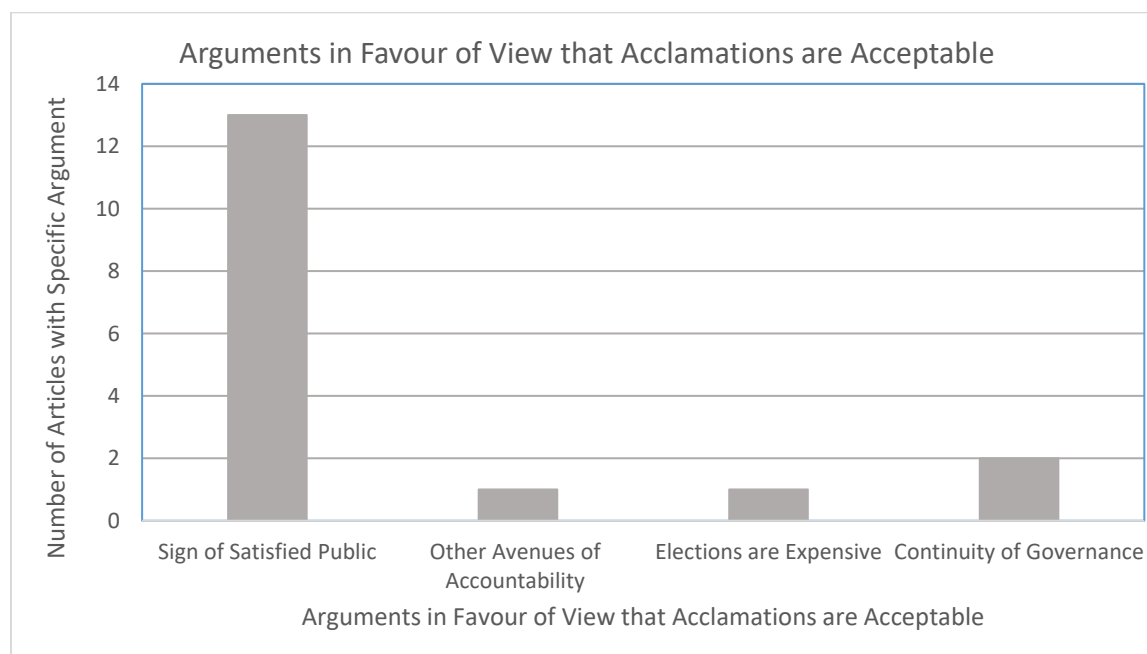
In support of each of these two views on acclamations, arguments were provided in justification of feelings of satisfaction or concern. Figures 3 and 4 below identify the various arguments for the positive and negative impacts of acclamations raised in the

newspaper articles. Each of these viewpoints and associated arguments will be explored in greater detail next.

Perspective #1: Acclamations are Acceptable

13 of the 29 articles providing detail on one or both of the perspectives in relation to acclamations include references to acclamations as being an acceptable local government phenomenon. Those seemingly content with the instance of uncontested elections offer a variety of arguments in favour of their position as follows: 1) acclamations are a sign of a satisfied public, 2) in instances where wide-spread acclamations occur (mostly small, rural municipalities) there are other opportunities for direct democracy, 3.) acclamations result in cost savings through avoidance of some or all election-related expenses, and 4) acclamations allow for a continuity of governance traditionally broken up by campaigning. Each of these arguments raised will be explored in more detail below.

Figure 3. Arguments provided in articles reviewed in support of the viewpoint that acclamations are acceptable.



Sign of Satisfied Public

“It’s a great show of support from the community, especially considering we had three of us from current Council elected by acclamation.” – *Shelley Hart, Mayor of East St. Paul, Manitoba* (Birnie 2018)

The strongest arguments that a cause for concern is not necessary as acclamations rise across the country is that they may truly signify a satisfied rather than a disenfranchised public. Mentioned in all 13 of the 29 articles offering arguments in support of the view that acclamations are acceptable, those unconcerned with acclamation argue that if voters are pleased with the work of their current representatives, or are supportive of the views and motives of an uncontested candidate, there may be no need to challenge them. As local politicians would surely rather believe they are uncontested because they are regarded as representing voters well rather than doing the job no one else wants, this view is often perpetuated.

It isn’t only acclaimed politicians who feel this way, however. One academic piece that supports this argument is Schmitt’s second edition of *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Schmitt argues that the act of voting anonymously is inherently undemocratic and turns to acclamation as a more accurate demonstration of the public will. “The unanimous opinion of one hundred million private persons is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed just as well and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence, than through the statistical apparatus...” (Schmitt 1923, 16). The public’s decision to demonstrate their preferred choice of representation through inaction therefore may be viewed as being as effective as taking action by casting a secret ballot.

It may be the case that acclamations are less concerning when incumbents are successful through this means. According to J.P. Lewis, Associate Political Professor at University of New Brunswick Saint John, “[s]ometimes the acclaimed candidates have a lot of experience and a long history in that position and voters are served just as well” (Clow 2020). In ranking municipalities in Southern Ontario by competitiveness using AMO’s 2018 Election database (elections.amo.on.ca) in order to conduct interviews for this research, it was determined that 71% of the local politicians in the ten least competitive municipalities in Southern Ontario were incumbents in the 2018 election. Some critics may find peace in this statistic as a large majority of those acclaimed are returning politicians. As noted above, incumbent politicians have more experience, are generally better prepared for the job at hand, and provide some semblance of continuity in support of promoting a longer-term vision.

Other Avenues for Accountability

“In Casselman, it’s likely that you will know someone on Council. If you disapprove of a decision, you can go speak to these people. Democracy is very direct in these small towns and villages. So it’s not that [winning by acclamation] hurts democracy, it’s that democracy happens in a different way.” – *Chris Erl, doctoral student at McGill University* (Corrigan 2018)

The benefits of having more direct access to local politicians in small rural towns where acclamations are most common as an offset for potential opportunities missed when elections are not necessary was raised once in the content reviewed. As noted by McGill University doctoral student Chris Erl in the above quotation, there is an understanding that local politicians are more accessible in smaller communities compared to larger city centres. A Statistics Canada *Rural and Small Town Canada* analysis bulletin supports this

idea by making reference to research that indicates public attendance at local council meetings is more frequent in rural compared to urban areas (Turcotte 2005, 14). According to the report, “[o]ne explanation for this greater attendance at public meetings in smaller places might be that there are greater possibilities of directly influencing the political process [there]” (ibid). Those who support this argument acknowledge that avenues for participation and public influence are not limited to elections alone and therefore not restricted even when members go uncontested.

Elections are Expensive

“It’s a lot of money for us. People don’t want to force an election even if they are interested.” – *Marc L’Heureux, Mayor of Brébeuf, Quebec* (Wheeler, Rocha & Montpetit 2017)

Beyond the disruptions in the governing process caused by elections to be explored next, municipalities that see some or all of their representatives acclaimed also realize significant savings in their electoral budgets. Costs savings resulting from avoiding having to hold a municipal election were referred to in only one article in support of the view that acclamations are acceptable.

Though in each of Canada’s 10 provinces, they are only held every four years outside of by-elections, municipalities often put aside funding each year to cover the increasingly high costs of running elections. Training, additional staffing, software, materials, advertising and now more commonly, electronic voting methods, cost municipalities thousands of dollars each term. Costs can range from \$10,000 for small, rural municipalities to millions of dollars in Canada’s largest city centres. According to the municipal Clerk in charge of budgeting and conducting elections, mid-size Georgina Township with a population of just over 45,000 realized an actual total election spending of \$300,068 in 2014 and \$295,674 in

2018. Where races are uncontested, municipalities will therefore experience significant savings of taxpayer dollars. Spending thousands on an election may be the most democratic way to ensure the public will is realized, but perhaps it is not the cost-effective, especially in an era of increased budget scrutiny and demands for greater service. It is not reasonable to argue that elections should be avoided merely to save money, but the unintended benefit of cost savings in an area where the public may be satisfied with the status quo is worth considering.

Continuity of Governance

“[C]ontinuity of local governance has proved to be an asset. Election turnover means a period of adapting for the newly elected and some files are cancelled while others are modified.” – *Incumbent Mayor Normand Dyette, Candiac, QC* (Valiante 2017)

Finally, reference to the benefit of continuity of governance as a result of acclamations was mentioned in two of the articles under study. Hesitant to make any new waves or undertake major initiatives, many Councils expecting or realizing high turnover in representation may be the least effective during campaign periods and the waiting period between Voting Day and inauguration of the new members. In cases where acclamations are declared, this awkward transitional phase is shortened or at times completely eliminated in areas where representatives continue uncontested from one term to the next. A smooth transition from one term to the next with all or a majority of politicians returning through acclamation removes unnecessary gaps in governing and allows councils to continue to focus on what is best for constituents, rather than personally oriented goals of re-election, some argue.

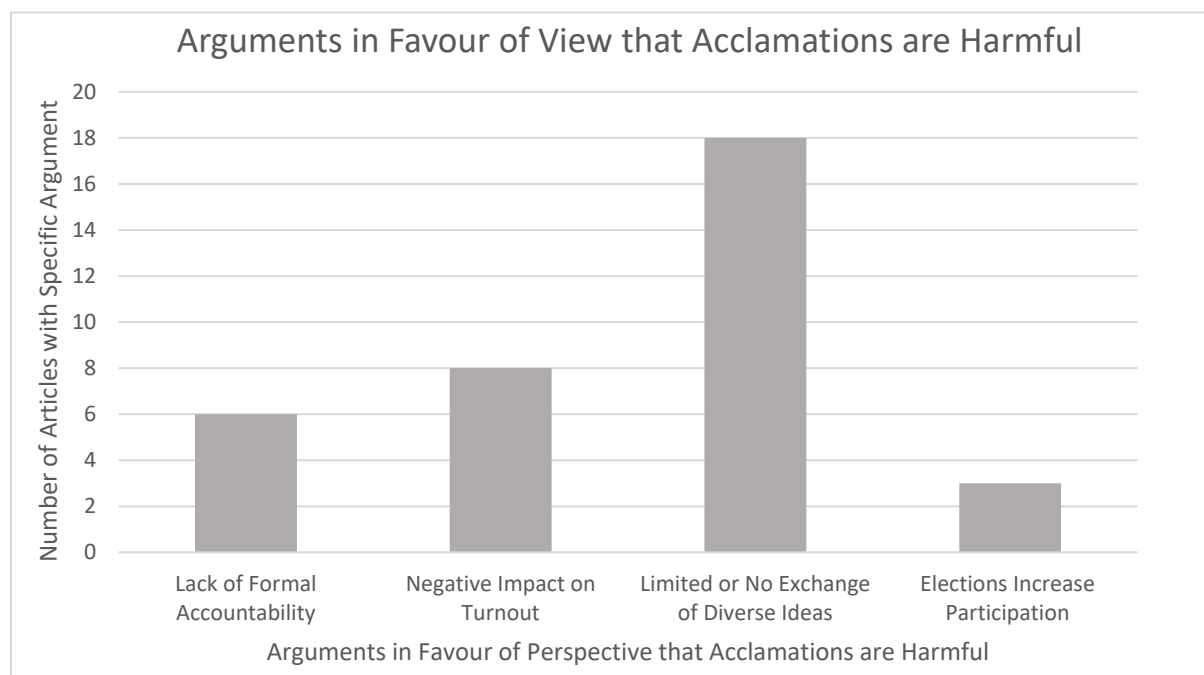
Further, in avoiding the effort needed to undertake an effective election campaign, acclaimed members may find time to speak with constituents in a more proactive manner

than they usually have time for. In an article by CBC Reporter Agatha Farmer, acclaimed Mayor Paul Kelly of Gravenhurst said he would spend the traditional campaign period preparing for the next term of Council, a time usually spent in defense (Farmer 2018). Some of the other acclaimed members interviewed in the articles indicated they would continue to participate in campaign events such as debates and visiting constituents even though they knew it would make no difference in the election outcome. Acclaimed Council member Janice Lucks in the City of Winnipeg, for example, said she would spend her campaign period getting to know residents and “tying up loose ends” (CBC News Manitoba 2018). These efforts may prove to be more effective and purposeful compared to the often reactive, battleground tactics of candidates used to win elections.

Perspective #2: Acclamations are Harmful

Many headlines such as *Anyone? Amalgamation looms but seats left unfilled in Northern Arm* and *Low turnout and uncontested elections: How healthy is municipal democracy in Quebec?* (Wheeler, Rocha & Montpetit 2017, Barry 2017) qualify acclamations as a problem impacting the health of local democracy across the nation. Arguments provided in defence of electoral races were raised in 22 of the 29 articles discussing views on the impacts of acclamations and are as follows: 1) acclamations result in a lack of accountability, 2) acclamations have a negative impact on voter turnout, 3) acclamations limit the exchange of diverse ideas, and 4) acclamations contribute to a decrease in apathy as elections serve to generate interest and bolster public participation. Below, support will be provided for each of the arguments raised against acclamations.

Figure 4. Arguments provided in articles reviewed in support of the viewpoint that acclamations are harmful.



Lack of Formal Accountability

“If incumbents have failed to represent the interests and concerns of their constituents, they should expect to be held accountable when they stand for re-election. But when there is no race, there is no opportunity for voters to hold the incumbent accountable.” Royce Koop, Associate Professor and Head of the Political Studies Department at the University of Manitoba (Koop 2018)

The argument that politicians who are granted an elected position without having to debate or defend their own ideas via the election process negatively impacts the public’s ability to hold these individuals to account is one that appears in six of the articles under consideration.

Democratic theory suggests two necessary elements of representative democracy are “the responsiveness of elected officials to citizen’s preferences on the one hand and accountability on the other” (Gerstle 2003, 862). According to Aars and Offerdal (1998), representative democracies depend on a healthy supply of candidates willing to act on behalf of the electorate (Aars & Offerdal 1998, 208). Those acclaimed to a position are not required to debate or defend their vision for the municipality and therefore may not prioritize the collective voice, especially if it does not align perfectly with their own views. In support of this idea, Schlesinger’s work referenced earlier highlights concerns that those politicians who are not required to pursue a fulsome election campaign, especially incumbents being acclaimed term after term, do not have incentives to act as voters wish (ibid, 211).

Currently in Ontario, a constituent’s capacity to hold an elected member to account lies mostly in their ability to cast a vote for or against them at the polls. Ontario’s *Municipal Act*, for example, does not provide for the removal of an individual from elected office outside of conviction of a criminal offense, subsequent and unauthorized absences, or as a resulting penalty following conviction of non-compliance with the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*. Existing accountability and transparency mechanisms including recent powers extended to Ontario’s Ombudsman, the mandated adoption of Council Codes of Conduct and the appointment of municipal Integrity Commissioners, are criticised as weak and lacking true enforcement tools.

Those who do not anticipate competition in the next election may not be as active in their roles as they might otherwise be if they were concerned their positions may be contested. There is currently no academic research to support the claim that acclaimed councillors in

Canada act in the same way, however this argument is supported in research from other locations, levels and systems of government. A 2011 study from the United States focused on the effects of uncontested elections on legislator performance revealed those who were not forced to undergo an election were more likely to skip votes and introduce less bills into the United States House of Representatives (Konisky & Ueda 2011, 222).

Negative Impact on Turnout

“Some of the big factors here are that you get a much higher turnout where you have municipal contests to vote for. This time, there were some communities where the entire Council was elected by acclamation.” – *Mike Quinn, New Brunswick’s Chief Electoral Officer* (McHardie 2016)

Eight of the articles reviewed contained references to the negative impact acclamations seem to have on voter turnout, a much-studied element of representative democracy. Following elections in Canada and other industrial democracies, analysis is typically conducted by researchers in relation to the number and types of voters who exercised their right to choose elected representatives and countless efforts are made each election cycle to increase voter turnout. Turnout is important to scholars and practitioners alike because it serves as a demonstration of an engaged and participatory citizenry. According to Breux and Couture (2018), voter turnout is a main fact, or phenomenon, which contributes to the quality of municipal democracy (Breux & Couture 2018, 3). In the volumes of literature related to voter turnout and the impacts of turnout decline, typically there are two streams of thought – first, that high voter turnout is desired, and second, that the amount and type of people who attend the polls and cast their ballot will have an impact on the policy decisions of those elected. In the absence of a reasonable amount of public participation by

voting, “the cleavages between voters and non-voters are likely to reinforce patterns of power and wealth” (Martinez & Gill 2006, 344).

Obviously in areas where full Councils were acclaimed, turnout registered at 0% since an election was not conducted. While a number of factors may contribute to the instance of low voter turnout, such as the convenience and accessibility of voting, lack of knowledge and information about the candidates, apathy and confusion over election cycles of various levels of government, without competition all efforts to increase participation at the polls are futile.

Limited or No Exchange of Ideas

“But do acclamations rob Ontarians of the opportunity for democratic discourse and debate that comes with a contested election? They sure do.” – *Jonathan Rose, Political Science Professor, Queens University* (Corrigan 2018)

Often cited as being ‘harmful to democracy’, 18 of the articles in the sample reviewed note a missed opportunity in the exchange of different ideas, visions, suggestions and concerns when positions are filled by acclamation. According to those sharing this belief, elections and the associated campaigns provide a platform from which to explore outside-the-box solutions to the growing number of issues facing today’s municipalities. “Nobody’s coming to solve these [complex] problems for these towns”, said Craig Pollett, CEO of Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador. “They need to find solutions themselves. One of the ways you do that is by engaging in a healthy debate around policies and direction. That’s the role elections play” (Kurjata 2018).

While some local politicians acclaimed to their positions noted in the articles they would continue with campaign activities such as door-knocking and participating in the all-candidates debates regardless, others indicated these tiring and expensive tasks were

unnecessary for them to undertake. Over the duration of the four year Council term, citizen's opinions on some issues have likely shifted and new solutions, considerations and threats to community prosperity have undoubtedly developed. Without being forced into engaging with the public and defending one's ideas in contrast with other competing ones during various campaign activities, acclaimed politicians may become complacent in their administration of the public will.

Elections Increase Participation

Finally, three of the articles hold that at times it is through gaining a richer understanding of municipal operations and governance that individuals become less critical and more engaged in local issues. Public participation and engagement is a major topic of consideration with respect to all levels of democratic governance across the globe. The idea that voters are increasingly disengaged with their municipalities and uninformed about how the actions of local politicians shape the world around them is well supported as outlined above. It is logical to suppose that advertising, increased media coverage and other promotional activities related to local races for office during competitive elections may mean members of the disinterested public find themselves more engaged. This in turn may lead to more direct participation, understanding or interest in local affairs. If local political positions go uncontested, the positive effect of campaigning on public engagement is not realized.

It is also worth noting that having a turnover of elected representatives provides a greater number of individuals with experience and increased knowledge of the role.

Research conducted in the Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Norway concluded that sometimes interest and motivation is developed through direct participation as a local

representative (Aars & Offerdal 1998, 225). In support of this finding, Freie said “through participation individuals acquire self-knowledge, become more tolerant, develop more positive feelings about themselves, their community, and society and, as a result, attitudes of cynicism and mistrust and feelings of system legitimacy are developed.” (Freie 1997, 134) While merely entering a race surely does not provide the same level of eye-opening clarity on the complexities involved as actually serving in the role, candidates must undertake some level of preparation for debates and develop a vision for the municipality and in doing so, certainly increase their local knowledge.

Discussion & Conclusion

The intent of this paper is to provide readers with a preliminary review of the causes of the acclamations at the local level in Canada. Reasons provided by academics, association representatives and past and current politicians offer some introduction to the question of what contributes to a lack of interested candidates in many of Canada’s municipalities. Apathy/lack of interest, incumbency advantage, poor pay, heavy, demanding workloads, increased criticism, shrinking populations, lack of power/prestige of local office, and term lengths were all suggested in the content analyzed as reasons contributing to a rise in acclamations. Interview findings do support opinions that workloads and increased criticism may be contributing to a less positive environment for attracting new candidates, but extrinsic rewards such as pay and power do not necessarily seem to be motivating factors for those who do decide to run.

Much like the research on the topic of political competition, views on the impact of acclamations and whether they are acceptable or harmful are mixed. Those who argue

acclamations are a sign of a satisfied public refer to the cost savings and continuity of governance inherent in avoiding elections as well as the belief that elections are only one of a number of available avenues for direct democracy. On the other hand, proponents of competitive elections raise concerns that acclamations contribute to a lack of accountability, suppression of diverse ideas, low voter turnout and a lack of opportunity for increased participation.

It is interesting to note that there is simply no consensus of opinion regarding the impacts of acclamations on municipal democracy. Because of this, acclamations may be viewed as something not worth investing resources into solving. That being said, the arguments that acclamations are harmful do seem to have more deep and lasting impacts on the success of the democracy as opposed to arguments raised by those who feel they are acceptable.

While it is logical that making efforts to increase candidate competition won't likely result in negative impacts, it is unclear whether any significant efforts should be called for since uncontested elections aren't presently found to be necessarily bad for communities.

Limitations of the methods used in this paper are worth mentioning. Both the content analysis and the interviews provided quite small samples from which to base this research. It is possible that other relevant articles were missed as the search terms excluded articles that did not specifically relate to acclamations. While some local publications were present in the results, much of the content came from major news sources such as the CBC. It does seem as though coverage on the topic of acclamations is increasing along with their occurrence so it may be that future research will have additional resources to turn to.

As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted prior to the completion of the analysis on the online newspaper articles. Had the analysis been completed prior to the interviews,

questions could have been drafted with the intent to probe specific opinions on the eight commonly referenced reasons for acclamations. This information would have been useful in responding to the arguments raised in the articles reviewed and it is likely that differences in findings would have resulted.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the merits or flaws of any of the arguments raised in the content or by the interviewees, efforts could be made by future researchers to evaluate the validity of certain opinions regarding acclamations. What is missing from the articles on the topic of acclamations is input from the electorate. If acclamations truly are a sign of satisfaction with the status quo, public opinion polling could be conducted to substantiate this. Especially in areas with a fully acclaimed council, voters could be asked specifically if they were pleased with the fact that races in their municipality went uncontested. It is one thing to ask politicians acclaimed to their positions about the impacts of such an occurrence, however additional insight in support of this argument from the citizens would surely serve to substantiate these anecdotal and potentially self-interested claims.

Though it is unclear whether acclamations truly are acceptable or harmful, proponents of the merits of representative democracy point to public participation and engagement as a fundamental cornerstone in its success. As candidacy could easily be viewed as a form of participation and as elections are expected to contribute to an increase in public engagement, potential efforts to remedy the case of acclamations are worth mentioning, briefly. When interviewed by the CBC with respect to concerns related to uncontested local elections, the Chief Electoral Officer in New Brunswick mentioned campaigns aimed at educating and recruiting new, diverse candidates to the race. Similar to 'Get Out the Vote'

campaigns, these efforts serve to target and encourage individuals to consider running for local office (Gill 2020). Education on the issues and responsibilities of local government should support efforts to recruit candidates as an alarming number of eligible candidates (and voters) are unaware of the goings-on in their local communities. Without an understanding of the opportunities that exist for young and diverse candidates looking to get involved in their communities, recruitment of this demographic is unlikely. Robust efforts supported by initiatives such as Local Government Week (<https://civix.ca/blog/ontario-local-government-week/>) could serve to educate the public and potentially increase candidate participation at the polls. While it may not be likely that education alone will lead to immediate changes, encouraging greater knowledge may contribute to an increased likelihood that these individuals will replace retirees as they themselves age.

An alternative, much more controversial remedy to acclamations includes the redrawing of various municipal boundaries by amalgamation, or redesigning council structures away from typical ward style elections. As uncontested elections typically impact small rural communities, it is foreseeable that a change in municipality size and population would contribute to an environment in which competitive elections may become more common (Brown 2020). It is not my position that the intricacies and challenges associated with municipal restructuring are offset by the potential benefits of contested elections. Rather, it may be worth considering competitive elections as an unintended advantage of the boundary restructuring that may be in the futures of small and rural municipalities, at least in Ontario. Perhaps an alternative, less dramatic, way to realize similar results may be to reduce the size of council in order to increase the pool of potential candidates for a smaller

number of seats.

As acclamations continue to rise in municipalities across Canada we may be left wondering whether the leaders of tomorrow will rise up to replace those currently carrying their community's burdens with little thanks. It remains unclear whether the dreams of the small town mayor are big enough for those with a desire to meaningfully contribute in tomorrow's increasingly complex world. Since there does not appear to be an urgent need to respond to the rise in acclamations in municipalities across the country, time will tell if impacts of uncontested elections are worth remedying.

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<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-mayors-acclaimed-1.4873107>

Appendix A – Content Analysis

1. Low turnout and uncontested elections: How healthy is municipal democracy in Quebec? CBC News Maria Wheeler, Roberto Rocha, Jonathan Montpetit October 27, 2017 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-municipal-election-1.4350065	
Reasons for acclamations:	-shrinking population
Acclamations are acceptable:	-no need for costly election -satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	-negative impact on turnout -elections bring about diverse ideas

2. No competition: Number of Ontario communities with acclaimed candidates rising CBC News. The Canadian Press Oct. 14, 2018 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/acclaimed-candidates-ontario-election-1.4862571	
Reasons for acclamations:	-poor pay -damage to reputation/criticism
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	

3. Newfoundland has a problem: no one wants to be a politician. Macleans. Kyle Edwards. October 2, 2017 https://www.macleans.ca/news/why-newfoundlanders-are-running-from-not-for-public-office/	
Reasons for acclamations:	-shrinking populations -damage to reputation/criticism
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

4. Elections New Brunswick puts the call out for candidates. CBC. Jordan Gill. Jun 7, 2020 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/elections-new-brunswick-candidates-1.5417240	
Reasons for acclamations:	-heavy workloads
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

5. Voter turnout dips to 34.5% in municipal elections. CBC. Daniel McHardie May 10, 2016. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/elections-new-brunswick-voter-turnout-1.3575493	
Reasons for acclamations:	

Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-negative impact on turnout

6. Acclamation overload? 2 more town councils named without elections. CBC News. September 8, 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/cartwright-dover-town-council-acclaimed-municipal-election-1.4275373	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections increase participation

7. In this eastern Ontario race, every candidate's a winner. CBC News Oct. 11, 2018. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/east-hawkesbury-municipal-election-2018-acclaimed-1.4846078	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	

8. More than 35 B.C. mayor elected without contest. Terrace Standard. Shannon Lough. Sept. 20, 2018. https://www.terracestandard.com/municipal-election/more-than-35-b-c-mayors-elected-without-contest/	
Reasons for acclamations:	-incumbency advantage -damage to reputation/criticism -term length
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-negative impact on turnout -elections bring about diverse ideas

9. No election needed in Clarendville as Mayor, entire council acclaimed. CBC News. Sept. 1, 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/clarendville-mayor-council-acclaimed-1.4271429	
Reasons for acclamations:	-heavy, demanding workloads -poor pay
Acclamations are acceptable:	-people are satisfied
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

10. Who will run Lingwick? Small Quebec township can't find mayoral candidates. CBC News. October 8, 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/lingwick-mayor-race-candidates-missing-1.4345984	
Reasons for acclamations:	-heavy, demanding workloads -poor pay
Acclamations are acceptable:	

Acclamations are harmful:	
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11. Janice Lucks acclaimed in new Waverly West ward. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/janice-lukes-waverley-west-acclamation-1.4829029	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-lack of accountability

12. No competition in Municipality of Shelburne election. CBC news. Pam Berman. September 29, 2016. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/municipality-of-shelburne-election-already-acclaimed-1.3782613	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	-people are satisfied
Acclamations are harmful:	-lack of accountability -elections bring about diverse ideas

13. A man dressed as a jug of Kool-Aid is the only reason there's a mayor's race in Terrace, B.C. CBC News. Andrew Kurjata. September 14, 2018. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/northern-bc-elections-1.4825030	
Reasons for acclamations:	-term length -heavy, demanding workloads -poor pay -incumbency advantage -voter apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-negative impact on turnout -elections bring about diverse ideas

14. Campbell River's acclaimed mayor wonders if four-year terms are a deterrent to candidates. Campbell River Mirror. Alistair Taylor. October 20, 2018. https://www.campbellrivermirror.com/news/campbell-rivers-acclaimed-mayor-wonders-if-four-year-terms-are-a-deterrent-to-candidates/	
Reasons for acclamations:	-length of term
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	

15. Peterborough County Acclamations a Sign of Disinterest in politics. The Peterborough Examiner. Examiner Staff. November 21, 2018. https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/opinion/editorials/2018/11/21/peterborough-county-acclamations-a-sign-of-disinterest-in-politics.html	
Reasons for acclamations:	-lack of prestige/power of local office
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas -apathy/lack of interest

16. Denley: Ottawa's non-race for the mayoralty shows it's time for municipal political parties. Ottawa Citizen. Randall Denley. July 24, 2018. https://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/denley-ottawas-non-race-for-the-mayorality-shows-its-time-for-municipal-political-parties	
Reasons for acclamations:	-incumbency advantage
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

17. Anyone? Amalgamation looms but seats left unfilled in Northern Arm. CBC News. Garrett Barry. September 10, 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/northern-arm-amalgamation-councillors-running-retirement-1.4280474	
Reasons for acclamations:	-apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	

18. Why car dealerships could be key to redrawing county boundaries. Mirage. March 12, 2020. Michael Brown https://www.miragenews.com/why-car-dealerships-could-be-key-to-redrawing-county-boundaries/	
Reasons for acclamations	-shrinking populations -apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-lack of accountability

19. Candidates acclaimed in 135 Sask. Rural municipalities ahead of elections. CBC News. Alicia Bridges. Oct. 23, 2018. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/rural-municipality-elections-2018-1.4875632	
Reasons for acclamations:	-apathy/lack of interest -shrinking populations
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	

20. Poli-Sci Prof Expects Some Acclamations Wins in NB in Upcoming Municipal Election. 91.9 The Bend, Moncton Radio Station. Tara Clow. Feb, 4, 2020. https://www.919thebend.ca/2020/02/04/poli-sci-prof-expects-some-candidates-will-win-by-acclamation-in-nb/	
Reasons for acclamations	
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

21. What happens when no one runs for Mayor? Quebec's small towns see drop off in candidates. The Star. Giuseppe Valiante. Oct. 16, 2017. https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/10/16/what-happens-when-no-runs-for-mayor-quebecs-small-towns-see-drop-off-in-candidates.html	
Reasons for acclamations:	-poor pay -heavy, demanding workloads -damage to reputation/criticism -incumbency advantage
Acclamations are acceptable:	-continuity of local government -satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	

22. No contest: Why it matters when candidates run unopposed. TVO. David Rockne Corrigan. October 11, 2018. https://www.tvo.org/article/no-contest-why-it-matters-when-candidates-run-unopposed	
Reasons for acclamations:	-poor pay -lack of power/prestige of local office
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public -other avenues of accountability
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas -apathy/lack of interest

23. Men, acclaimed candidates overwhelmingly make up Sask. RM Councils. CBC News. Sept. 28, 2018 https://www.tvo.org/article/no-contest-why-it-matters-when-candidates-run-unopposed	
Reasons for acclamations:	-apathy/lack of interest -incumbency advantage -damage to reputation/criticism
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

24. No need to vote: Why an acclaimed council threatens local democracy CBC News Sarah Smellie Sept. 11, 2017 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/more-acclamation-less-democracy-1.4282358	
Reasons for acclamations:	-heavy, demanding workloads -apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas -elections increase participation

25. Acclimatizing to acclamations. Coast Reporter. Sean Eckford March 1, 2018. https://www.coastreporter.net/opinion/editorial/acclimatizing-to-acclamations-1.23188629	
Reasons for acclamations:	-length of term
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas -elections increase participation

26. Tough races are good for democracy. Winnipeg Free Press. Royce Koop. October 19, 2018. https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/civicelection2018/waverleywest/tough-races-are-good-for-democracy-497997691.html	
Reasons for acclamations:	-incumbency advantage -low prestige/power of local office -apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas -lack of accountability

27. What we know so far about Regina's municipal election. CBC News. Emily Pasiuk. May 5, 2020. https://www-cbc-ca.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/regina-municipal-election-2020-1.5555051?cmp=rss	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

28. Candidate's withdrawal cancels Alberton, PEI, byelection. Journal Pioneer. Eric McCarthy. September 4, 2019. https://www.journalpioneer.com/news/local/candidates-withdrawal-cancels-alberton-pei-byelection-348321/	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	-lack of accountability -elections bring about diverse ideas

29. Hart elected by acclamation to second term. The Winnipeg Free Press. Sheldon Birnie. Sept. 21, 2018. https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/our-communities/herald/Hart-elected-by-acclamation-to-second-term-493976311.html	
Reasons for acclamation	
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public
Acclamations are harmful:	

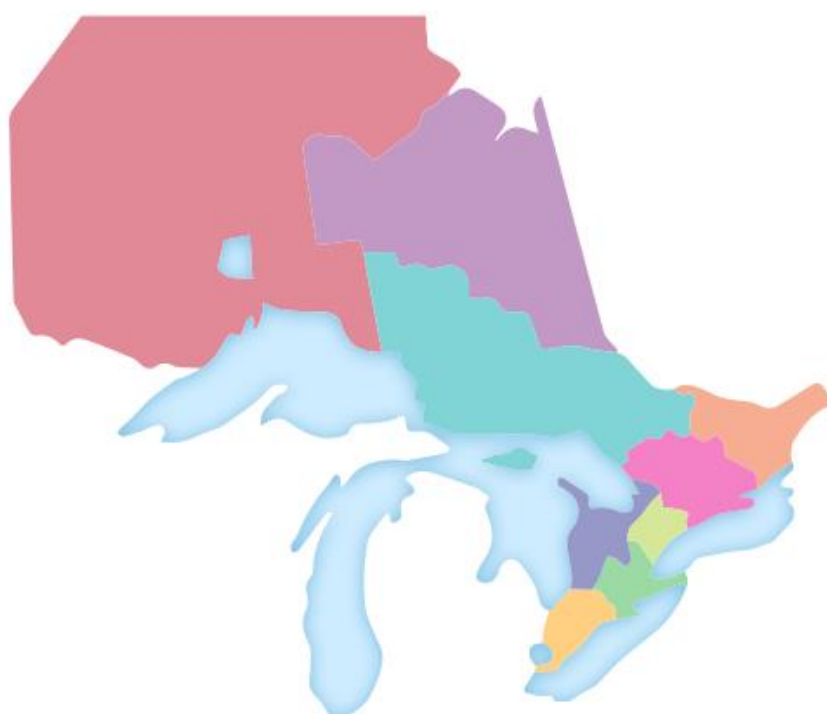
30. Picture Butte mayor marks last days on Council. The Sunny South News. Nikki Jamieson. October 19, 2017. http://www.sunnysouthnews.com/news/2017/10/19/picture-butte-mayor-marks-last-days-on-council/	
Reasons for acclamations:	-shrinking population
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-elections bring about diverse ideas

31. Coun. Paul Kelly has been acclaimed Gravenhurst's new mayor. MuskokaRegion.com Agatha Farmer. Aug. 7, 2017. https://www.muskokaregion.com/news-story/8803293-coun-paul-kelly-has-been-acclaimed-gravenhurst-s-new-mayor/	
Reasons for acclamations:	-incumbency advantage -apathy/lack of interest
Acclamations are acceptable:	-satisfied public -continuity of local government
Acclamations are harmful:	

32. Candidate recruitment in municipal elections. Policy Options Colin Scott, Mike Mederios, Chris Erl. July 17, 2018 https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2018/candidate-recruitment-municipal-elections/	
Reasons for acclamations:	
Acclamations are acceptable:	
Acclamations are harmful:	-negative impact on turnout

Appendix B - Zone Map

Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario
<https://www.amcto.com/Connecting/Zones>



ZONES:



Appendix C – Interview Guide

This interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes and will include 17 questions regarding your experiences, motivations and beliefs about your role and responsibilities in local government and the impact of acclamations in municipalities in Southern Ontario. As previously indicated, I appreciate your permission to tape record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know and your responses will not be included. All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of how you and your peers view uncontested municipal elections.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

1. Were you an incumbent in the election or was 2018 your first time seeking office?
2. What factors motivated you to seek elected office?
3. Prior to your role in local government, did you participate in any other governance functions such as school board trustee, board of directors etc.?
4. Do you recall the date you filed your nomination papers for the 2018 election? If the position was not acclaimed, were there other candidates in the race before you filed? Did this impact your decision to put your name forward?
5. Please rank your level of agreement with the following statements (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), after which you are invited to elaborate on your response if you wish.
 - a) You are adequately compensated for your work in local government.
 - b) If the role was entirely unpaid, you would still seek election.
 - c) Social media has made the role of local politician easier.
 - d) Social media has made the role of local politician more challenging.
 - e) In a recent Toronto Star article about the rising number of acclamations in local elections in Ontario, Mayor Kevin Marriott of Inniskillin stated he's noted a "shift in the tone of municipal discourse in many areas as people are more likely to level sharp critiques" than they were in the past.
6. How demanding is the position? Do you find you are able to balance workloads as needed?
7. Were you prepared for the amount of work required?
8. Would a decrease in compensation make you consider seeking re-election in 2022?
9. Would an increase in workload make you consider seeking re-election in 2022?
10. Does your elected office come with any staff support?
11. If a friend or family member came to you seeking advice with respect to whether they should run for local office, what would you say to them?
12. 26 municipalities in Ontario saw full Councils acclaimed in 2018. Some argue acclamations are a sign of a satisfied public. Others raise concerns that lack of competition in elections is harmful to public engagement and the democratic foundation. Which statement best suits your opinions on acclamations?

13. Which age category do fit into?

18-24

25-40

41-60

61-85

14. What is the highest level of education you have attained?

Some high school

High School Diploma

College Diploma

Undergraduate Degree

Masters or Professional Degree or Designation

Doctoral Degree

15. What is your professional background?

16. Besides your work at the municipality, are you employed elsewhere? Full-time or Part-time?

17. Are you currently receiving any regular income outside of your municipal remuneration such as employment income, pension or other?

18. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to share?